HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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PAUL & BERYL SMEAD

Interviewed by

Patricia Young

June 20, 1980

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INTERVIEWEES: PAUL & BERYL SMEAD

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

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PY: Interview for the Historical Society of

Interview with Paul and Beryl Smead for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on Friday, June 20, 1980, at eleven-thirty in the morning at their home on Middleton Street betwen Thermal and Oasis.

Let's start this afternoon by, oh, don't worry, it's okay. Let's start this morning talking about how your family came to the desert area.

PS: Well, my father owned a ranch in Yucaipa, California, raising apples, peaches, plums, cherries. And in 1929, during the depression, he lost his farm up there and took a job in the Coachella Valley with a Mr. Codowl who owned a date garden on what is now Airport Boulevard and Jackson Street. He managed that farm for about, for over ten years and planted many of the date palms which are now the Codiga Ranch. Then he had a chance to buy

a farm of his own again in Palm Desert. He bought twenty acres there with five acres of dates already planted and fifteen acres of raw land. He moved out there, drilled a well, built a house, and started farming. He planted about five more acres of dates and another five acres of grapes, and later on planted a few more dates.

PY: Can you describe where the property actually was?

PS: The property was on Highway 111 and Smead Road. I think Smead Road has now been changed to El Dorado Way, but it ran from the highway . . .

PY: North?

PS: North, yes, to the storm drain, and adjoined the Askell Ranch to the west.

PY: Didn't you mention you had some neighbors, a Mr. Gee?

PS: Yes, there was a Mr. Gee who owned twenty acres between the Askell and my dad's place. Yes, that's right.

PY: So actually Smead Road would be next to the new fire station.

PS: I believe that's right. The new fire station is being built just east of my father's place. And that place now is converted into golf courses and pools and lakes. I think my father would turn over in his grave if he

could see it. He spent so much time leveling that land and getting it just perfect for irrigation, and now they've come in and bulldozed it all out and made it back into the desert sand dunes again. But I guess that's progress.

PY: When did he move to that? Do you remember?

PS: I think it was about 1941 when he bought that place. I remember we were working in Los Angeles at that time and he had spent most of his money buying the place and he needed a tractor. And he asked me if I could loan him some money to buy a tractor with. Well, fortunately, I had fifteen hundred dollars in the bank, and that's what a tractor cost at that time. So he bought a new Ford tractor with the implements and in a couple of years he paid me back with interest. So he did well on that place. But eventually land prices went up and trees were getting taller and all his sons had gone away and he decided that it was easier to sell it for a high profit and live on the money he received from it than trying to farm it because it would take him a long time to make as much as he got out of it.

PY: When did he sell it then?

PS: He sold it about 1960.

BS: ✓ 35 It would have been before ✓ that. You'll have to ask Walter 55

PS: I don't remember exactly what time he sold it. It was somewhere in the late fifties or early sixties. But he was still climbing the date trees when he was sixty-five ✓ years old. He built a picking tower that would booms that went out, and it had a winston that would raise it up and down and pulled it behind the tractor. And he picked his own dates and packed them in his own packing house. And sold them out on the highway. He had a little date stand out there and he sold all his own fruit and he made a good profit on it that way.

PY: His wasn't the El Dorado Gardens, was it?

PS: No. No, it had a little sign, Smead Date Gardens, out there. I helped him build his packing house and installed the equipment in it. And I owned a third interest in it until I bought my own place. And then I sold out to my dad and my brother who then ran the ranch. After we got back from the service, we both came back to the valley. And after they sold the ranch, then my brother bought another place in the Thermal area and later moved to La Quinta. Now he lives in Beaumont. We bought this place in about 1950 here in Thermal in

the Oasis area. And although we've been gone for fifteen years at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, it's good to be back again. We spent nine years in Pakistan and five years in Kenya, and then we did surveys and short tours in Iraq and Iran, Libya, Sudan, Botswana and we traveled around quite a bit.

PY: I would say. You were telling me a little bit about how the road was named. I thought that was interesting.

PS: Oh, yes. My dad was out on the tractor one day, and a fellow came by with all his maps and said he was from the County Road Department. They were trying to name all the little roads out there, and he wanted to know who that land belonged to. And my dad said, well, he owned it. He said, well, how would you like to have the road named after you then? So Dad said okay. So they named it Smead Road. And I think it's still Smead Road on many of the county maps, even though they've changed it to El Dorado now.

PY: What kind of dates and grapes was he growing?

PS: He had all Deglet Noor dates. That area seemed to grow some of the finest dates in the valley. The climate was ideal. During the months when the dates were maturing, the warm breezes drifted down the canyons out of the

local hills and just gently matured the dates to a beautiful translucent golden color. You could almost see the date seeds inside the date. And he always fertilized heavily and the dates were always large, beautiful fruit. And it's a shame that we've lost some of our best date-growing area to golf courses and condominiums, but I guess the date gardens will have to be planted in the lower part of the valley now where the agriculture is zoned for agriculture. And you can't blame people for wanting to live in that area because it is a very beautiful place. The colors on the mountains in the morning when the sun up are out of this world. After traveling all around the world several times, we still haven't found a place that we like better.

PY: Did he have any people helping him?

PS: He did most of the work himself, although he did hire people to come and prune his grapes and sometimes to help with date picking and date packing. At the little packing house they employed about six people. They picked the dates, fumigated them, graded them, put them in the cold storage, and then they packed them as they needed them in the date shop. He also had a little mail-order business that they shipped dates to people who

requested them.

PY: How did he set that up?

PS: Well, it just came naturally, I guess. People bought dates out there and liked them, would come back and say, do you have a brochure of your dates. So they made them a little brochure and handed them out when they sold the dates. And many people ordered from all over the country because it was an ideal spot right on the main highway, scenic route through the date gardens. And they had no trouble selling their crop. I remember the first year or two he sold his dates to another packer, a large packer, and he didn't get a very good return back. He didn't get what he thought he should have, so he said, you know, I think we better pack our own dates. He said we can do better than this. So he started building a little packing house. And he said, you know how to set this machinery up. You've been working in a big packing house, so come out and help me. So we gathered up enough equipment to get it going, and just as the date season started we had just started packing. The big packer came in to see about getting that year's crop and he said, what are you doing here, Mr. Smead? He said, building a packing house. He said, you're not going to pack your

own dates, are you? And he said, I sure am. He said, you'll go broke. You can't make it. And Dad said, well, we'll see. He said, I'm going to go broke if I keep selling to you. So that year he did very well. Then he did very well until he finally sold the place. There's nothing like working for yourself. And he enjoyed it, too. It was a good life and he was his own boss. He always had time to go fishing when he wanted to. He and Lee Anderson used to go over to Oceanside to go fishing. They'd get up at two o'clock in the morning and be over there at five o'clock, get on the early boat, and take a washtub in the back of the car and they'd buy a chunk of ice when they came back on the boat and put all their fish in it. They always came back with a lot of fish, almost always anyway.

PY When you were there that year, you were there, were there many neighbors? Actually when were you there, after the war?

PS: Yes, we were there about . . .

BS: 1949. After Bill was born. Just before you bought this place.

PS: That's right. About 1949.

PY: Were there many neighbors around you at that point?

PS: No, Art Cavanagh lived back on the Askell Ranch. I think he was the manager, and it was probably a half a mile away. And on the other side, I think the lady that owned that ranch was an absentee owner. She had someone working on the place. I never really got to know them very well. So further down the road was the other Cavanagh's place, Bert Cavanagh. And over near the hills were a family called Harmon. They were drilling a well over there, drilling their own well with a tractor, they had their tractor rear tire taken off and they had an A-frame with a sand bucket rig on it. They started the tractor up, pulled the sand bucket up, release the clutch and make it drop down, and get a bucket of sand out of the hole, and they'd pull it up again. And that was real pioneering. They drilled their own well. Got good water. It was excellent water in that area. And I've been reading about nitrogen being in the water out here. There was nitrogen in my dad's well when he drilled it and his grapes grew profusely. They had long runners, and I have a hunch that that nitrogen has been in the ground water table for a long time. I don't think it's, because they were a long way from any metropolitan area where a lot of sewage water

would be getting into the ground table. And there was just naturally nitrogen in the water.

PY: How did your dad drill his well?

PS: He had a local well-drilling outfit go out there. I used to know the names of all those fellows, but I forgot who they were now. But they came and drilled it. They put a lame-motor pump on it. It was three hundred, no, it was four hundred and some feet deep, but the water table stood at about fifty feet so they had to raise it fifty feet. It was a very good well. Had a draw down of about ten feet when they were pumping. And he put a pipeline from the highway all the way back to the storm drain, about a ten-inch pipeline which he irrigated his dates and his grapes. He had it set up so he could just open about five valves and let it run slowly through the garden. And he'd change the water every twelve hours so that he got a good irrigation.

PY: When you're saying change the water every twelve hours, what do you mean?

PS: Well, he let the water run for twelve hours on each set, and then he'd change it to the next five rows. And, of course, his grapes, that was on his dates, he'd run it for twelve hours on the grapes. I don't think he would

take so long.

PY: What kind of grapes were they?

PS: They were Thompson seedless. And they always came in very late out there, but he usually got on a good market at the end of the season after the other grapes on the lower end of the valley were off. And it was the same with the dates. They ripened late out there. But it was due to the more moderate climate. They didn't get the intense heat right there in the evenings during the ripening season. And it could have been the extra nitrogen in the soil, too, that kept them in a greener stage for a longer period. But whatever it was, they ripened later than they do down in the lower end of the valley.

PY: Oh, in terms of the workers he was employing, were they at that point, say in the forties, were they of Mexican descent or were they part of the bracero program or were they still people coming in from Oklahoma and some of the southern states?

PS: In the packing house they were mostly local women who just worked for the few months packing the dates. They were wives of some of the workers. In the field he has some braceros during that bracero program. And in the grapes there were picking crews at that time who were

managed by one man and they would take a contract to pick their grapes. And he would bring his own men in, and most of them were Mexicans. I remember when I was going to high school I used to work every summer in the grapes, picking grapes and packing. We used to pick in the morning and pack in the afternoon because the grapes have to be picked early when the sugar content is high. Later on in the afternoon they get, and lose its sugar. So then we would pack in the afternoon. But I would make enough money during the grape season, I made thirty-five cents an hour, and I was a straw boss. (chuckle) I had to take the fellows, the rest of the boys, to work in the morning. I'd make enough money to spend the summer in the mountains. I'd take my horse right after grape season and head for the hills. And we had a camp in Herkey Creek. All our neighbors had camps along the creek there. And there was the Andersons and the Overholsers and the Smeads, and the ladies took their treadle sewing machines and their chickens, and we had a cow, and the boys took their horses, and we all kept them across the creek over there. And we played baseball. Then we had a good time there in the summer. Then the men came up on weekends when they could get away. And we didn't have refrigeration in those

days and it was a fine place to spend the summer. And that camp was built, Herkey Creek Camp was originally built for that type of thing. Caretaker reserved those spaces for us every year. They were free and, well, we had a good time up there. I remember when they were building the Palm Spines Highway, we used to go up every weekend and see how far they'd gotten with it. And it was built with prison labor, and they were working away and blasting those big cuts through the sides of the hills up there. And I remember Lee Anderson had an old high-wheeled Dodge, about a 1926 model, and it was the best car to go up in there because it had those high wheels. It would roll over the rocks so we could get up there. (chuckle) And everybody would pile in and we'd go up there and see how far the road had gotten that week. All the valley people were looking forward to that road so they could get out in the summertime. That is quite a drive otherwise. They had to go all the way around to Beaumont and down to Hemet and back up to Idyllwild from the other side.

PY: Where was this camp? I mean, I don't know where Herkey Creek is.

PS: Herkey Creek Camp? It's at Lake Hemet. Just beyond Lake

Hemet a little bit. There was always good fishing down in the lake, and it was a fine place to stay. So we didn't lead too bad a life in those days.

PY: Were there cabins or just

PS: Oh, we took our tents. And Andersons never took a tent. They always built a fine establishment with awnings built over a framework. They had a kitchen shack and bedroom area and place where they put their easy chairs to sit.

PY: That sounds marvelous. Do you remember who made up their brochures that your dad was using or anything about it?

PS: I don't remember. It was just a little brochure. I don't know whether he had it printed or whether he printed it himself.

PY: Do you still have copies of it?

PS: I don't think we do. Walt may have some.

PY: Was there any difficulty in actually building the house and the packing plant in terms of getting of materials?

PS: Well, there was no code or anything in those days. You'd just build it, you know. Dad designed his own plant. We built the packing house out of framework and covered with sheet metal, corrugated iron. And the cold storage was built out of block. It was insulated Fiberglas. And the fumigators were all built and sealed. It was a

small plant, but it was fine for the amount of acreage he had. We got this old history of the Smead family. And my dad went back to 1636 when they came in to Massachusetts. The Widow Smead (chuckle) name on it.

PY: Well, she must have married somebody, I guess.

PS: Yes, she did.

BS: She came with children.

PS: Well, she died shortly after she came, but she had these three kids.

PY: Oh.

PS: But this William Smead was born in England. And John Smead . . . Apparently they kept going . . .

PY: When your dad sold the property, do you know whether they maintained it as the new owners maintained it as a ranch?

BS: We would have been over at, well, I guess we must have been still here before we went overseas, but it was so near that time I can't remember.

PS: All this transpired, I think, when we were gone, wasn't it? Well, Walt was down here on fifty-eighth then when we left, wasn't he? So he must have sold it before sixty. He must have sold it in the . . .

BS: Yes. Before he got that 324 know more about that, the date on that. Want to have some lunch, some little salad?

PY: Packing houses in the area.

PS: Not right in that area. There was one over in Rancho Mirage. I think Duvall had a packing house out there.

PY: Kersten probably had one, too, didn't he?

PS: Yes, Kerstens had one, too. And I think, there's a little date shop further up toward Palm Desert. What was the name of that place?

Spanish type.

BS: There's the El Dorado one, it's on the south side. Then on the north side, it's inside, her dad was on their estate, McGaw Ranch. And that's past up where the Cooks had their plant.

PS: Yes, it was across from Cook's there. I think they have a little packing house back in there. That's was Lynn Wilson's place in

BS: Oh, yes.

PS: But they just packed them up for their own date shop, I think. But there weren't too many. Most of the packing houses in that area were small places along the highway that marketed their own fruit. And larger places like

Kersten's and Duvall's had larger date groves and they sold wholesale and retail both. Of course, Cal Date in Indio was a large packer. And then there were several more packers at that time. Lee Anderson had the Coachella date garden New York packing house. Let's see, there was the soft date house in Coachella with the Associated Date Growers and Packers. I think they packed mostly Khadrawys and Halawys. But most of the dates out in that area were Deglets except for some that Duvall had with their honey dates. Their honey dates, everybody wanted them; they were very delicious, soft, sweet, juicy fruit.

PY: Are they like the Barklet date?

PS: Something like the Barklet They ripe it earlier in the Barklet and the Barklies has a very thin skin on it. They ripen late, but they're sure delicious dates.